

Introduction to the Research

This research study focuses on a set of proposed eating habit questions for inclusion in the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is interested in obtaining a better understanding of the design considerations, with respect to interview wording and format, for a series of questions to be asked of mothers of children in kindergarten and/or first grade (Grades K-1), regarding their child's food consumption habits. These questions are planned for potential incorporation into the Grades K-1 waves of data collection for the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

Increasing concern about children's diet and the development of childhood obesity provides a foreground for this research. The ECLS-B provides a unique opportunity to collect longitudinal data on the development of children's eating behaviors from birth through early childhood. Past research on the ECLS-K has explored the best response options for fifth graders. In this study, the focus is on parents' ability to answer a similar set of test questions as proxies for their kindergarten and/or first grade children. While this study does not directly compare first grade children's responses to those provided by parents, it does provide some insight into the factors impacting parents' ability to recall their kindergarten and/or first grade child's eating behavior.

The overall objectives of this study were to determine what time period works best for parents (mothers) in responding to a series of questions on food consumption habits of their kindergarteners and/or first grade children, and to determine how parents understand the questions and identify any areas of difficulty or confusion in them or the response options.

To answer these objectives, the following research questions were developed:

- a. Do the respondents interpret the questions, as asked, in the manner intended by ERS? If not, are there changes in wording that will improve understanding?
- b. What time period do respondents feel more comfortable with, in responding to the questions—for example, the past 24 hours or the past week?
- c. Are the response options suggested by ERS appropriate? Are respondents able to use these response options to describe their children's behavior? If not, are there changes in response options that would be more appropriate?

A special concern for this research is not only determining what changes may need to be made to improve the usability of the questions for mothers as proxies, but also considerations of comparability between the proposed set for mothers of K/grade 1 children and the existing questions used with fifth graders.